

1998 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey

Data Preview III: Air Bags

Following are results from the 1998 Motor Vehicle Occupant Safety Survey conducted for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The survey employed 2 questionnaires, each administered by telephone to a national sample of approximately 4,000 randomly selected persons age 16 and older. Interviewing began November 5, 1998, and continued through January 12, 1999. The data are weighted to yield national estimates. Detailed results from the survey will be published later in a series of NHTSA reports.

Air Bag In Primary Vehicle

More than half of drivers (53%) said that the vehicle they normally drive has an air bag, set on the driver side only (18%) or both the driver and passenger sides (34%). Comparing the numbers across years shows air bags rapidly penetrating the vehicle fleet (see Table on back). The survey did not ask about side impact air bags due to the recency of their introduction. Future surveys will question drivers about the presence of these devices.

Concern Over Air Bags

The 1996 survey entered the field during a period of heightened concern over air bag safety due to extensive publicity at that time of incidents where children were fatally struck by air bags. That year, 62% of the public admitted having safety concerns about air bags. Fewer (51%) said they had air bag concerns in the 1998 survey. Besides this decrease, the nature of the concerns shifted. Among persons who said they had concerns, 58% specifically referred to child injury in 1996 as opposed to 41% in 1998. Only 21% specifically referred to adult injuries in 1996 versus 30% in 1998. The percentage of persons who referred to injuries but didn't categorize the victim also increased, from 22% in 1996 to 30% in 1998. Concern about air bags was more prevalent among females (56%) than males (46%). Females were less likely than males to say that they felt safer in vehicles with air bags (36% to 45%) and less likely to want both driver and passenger air bags on their next vehicle (65% to 75%).

Knowledge About Air Bags

The public largely knew an air bag is not a substitute for a seat belt; only 4% incorrectly agreed that they did not need to wear a seat belt if an air bag was present. But other items showed lack of understanding of how air bags work. When asked the minimum speed a vehicle would have to be hit for an air bag to deploy, the most frequent response was "Don't Know" (35%). No single speed, or range of speeds, garnered more than a small percentage of votes as responses spread widely from 1 to more than 75 mph, suggesting that most were guessing. Much of the public also did not know that air bags in most vehicles currently on the road are designed to deploy only in front impact collisions. Almost half (46%) expected an air bag to deploy if they were hit from the back at moderate speed; 43% expected deployment when hit from the side. Despite the recent advent of side impact air bags, the 43% figure is consistent with findings in previous years when few such devices had been installed, suggesting that the response was not based on awareness of the change.



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		1998	1996	1994
**Does the (vehicle) you normally drive have an air bag?	Yes, Driver Side Only	18%	19%	16%
	Yes, Driver and Passenger	34%	19%	7%
	Yes, Don't Know Type	1%	*	*
	No	46%	61%	75%
	Don't Know/Refused	1%	1%	1%
**If you are driving in a vehicle that has an air bag and you get into an accident involving major vehicle damage is it likely or unlikely that you would be injured?	Likely	33%	34%	22%
	Unlikely	40%	42%	55%
	Depends	13%	7%	8%
	Don't Know/Refused	14%	17%	15%
Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement. If my car has a (driver/passenger) side air bag, I don't need to wear my seat belt when (driving/riding).	Agree	4%	5%	6%
	Disagree	92%	93%	90%
	Don't Know/Refused	3%	3%	4%
Do you have any concerns about the safety of air bags?	Yes	51%	62%	NA
	No	46%	36%	NA
	Don't Know/Refused	3%	2%	NA
Based on what you know or have heard, how likely is it that an adult sitting in the front seat would be injured by an air bag when it opens normally?	Very Likely	14%	13%	NA
	Somewhat Likely	38%	34%	NA
	Somewhat Unlikely	19%	23%	NA
	Very Unlikely	15%	20%	NA
	Don't Know/Refused	14%	10%	NA
How likely is it that a small child sitting in the front seat would be injured by an air bag when it opens normally?	Very Likely	59%	54%	NA
	Somewhat Likely	22%	27%	NA
	Somewhat Unlikely	6%	7%	NA
	Very Unlikely	4%	5%	NA
	Don't Know/Refused	9%	7%	NA
In general, do you feel safer in motor vehicles with air bags, about the same, or less safe in vehicles with air bags than those without air bags?	Safer	40%	42%	NA
	About The Same	43%	41%	NA
	Less Safe	8%	10%	NA
	Don't Know/Refused	8%	8%	NA
Would you prefer that your next vehicle have driver side air bags only, driver and passenger side air bags or no air bags?	Driver Side Only	5%	9%	NA
	Driver and Passenger Side	70%	63%	NA
	No Air Bags	18%	22%	NA
	Don't Know/Refused	7%	6%	NA



Numbers may not total 100% due to rounding. *Less than .5%. ** Asked of drivers whose primary vehicle is not a motorcycle. NA - The question was not asked during that year.